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ABSTRACT

Noting that early childhood professionals around the world have a great deal in common with each other and often understand one another better than persons in their own countries who do different kinds of work, this paper explores how quality early childhood programs might meet the needs of all children. The paper first explores trends affecting early childhood provision, remarking on the steady increase in the proportion of women with young children who work full time, and concomitant proportion of children cared for by someone other than their parents during work hours. It is noted that on the whole, the quality of U.S. child care is poor. The paper then examines some paradoxes: in the assumption that caregivers should be trained professionals, but who should respect parents as their child's first (or best) teacher and the parents' culturally determined ways of child rearing; in the need of children to feel loved by a confident parent while parents are undermined by a barrage of information on how to raise their children; in the increasing preparation of very young children for future standardized testing within the early childhood setting; and in the views of those "inside" and "outside" the early childhood culture as to what constitutes quality. The second part of the paper examines five perspectives from which to examine the quality of early childhood provision--top-down, bottom-up, inside, outside-in, and societal--focusing particularly on the bottom-up, that is, how the program is experienced by the children themselves. Implications of these five perspectives are then discussed, particularly whose criteria are most important (e.g., a program could fall below acceptable standards on the top-down criteria, but still be experienced as satisfactory by most of the participating children), and issues of accountability. (HTH)

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What is Basic to all our Children; A Contemporary Perspective

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OMEP World Conference, Turkey
Kucadaci, Turkey

October 9, 2003

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It is a great honor to participate in this conference and to have this opportunity to make a presentation to so many colleagues from so many countries. In preparation for this meeting, Dr. Haktanir and I exchanged many messages about the topic for this session. We agreed that I should address the question of what is basic to all of our children, and particularly to put the answers in a contemporary perspective based recent research and new knowledge, and in addition, indicate recent developments in the US. You can easily see how this could take several months!

On an occasion like this, the question of the topic is always a problem for several reasons. First, because I know that so many of you have heard me speak before, perhaps as recently as at the OMEP conference in Chile just a little more than two years ago. Second, because my experience and knowledge of current issues is based largely on North American trends and literature and I cannot be sure of its relevance to conditions in other countries. So I must leave it to you to decide what aspects of these answers apply in your own environments and contexts that have different traditions and constraints to consider.

However, I must say that I have been working in this wonderful field of early childhood education for forty years now. During all of this time I have worked with colleagues in fifty other countries. Turkey now being number fifty-one! I am delighted to be able to join you here. But, looking back on all of these experiences has convinced me that people who do the same kinds of work - even in different countries - have a great deal in common with each other, and I believe they often understand each other better than people in their own countries who do different kinds of work.

I propose to speak in three parts. First, a brief overview of main trends, as I see them. Second, to outline how we might look at the problems of determining the quality of programs that our children need. Thirdly, to show you an example of what it can look like when we address the main issues of the quality of experiences that would address all our children's needs.

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I. Recent trends

As to recent some of the recent trends that affect our work with young children - at least in the US and to some extent in the UK as well - some of the following main points provide a very brief picture.

First, there is certainly a strong trend in the US and some other countries toward a steady increase in the proportion of women who work full time, even though they have young children. This, of course, means that larger and larger proportions of our very young children spend more and more time being cared for by people who are not their parents - almost always by other women.

Second, a related issues, is that as long as boys and girls have the same level of education, and in fact, go to school together, then it is reasonable to assume that they will have the same range of life goals, aspirations, ambitions for careers and work. In other words, girls develop the same strong motivation for work as do boys. Perhaps not a a cause, but a side-effect of such a trend means that young women, when they become mothers, may be reluctant to spend long hours with little children, devoting all day, every day for several years to taking care of them at home, often alone and separated from other family members.

So it is that in many of our countries, provisions must be made for more and more, younger and younger children to be cared for in out-of-home settings.

On the whole, in the US, the quality of the provisions for very young children, especially those in all-day care, is poor on many criteria of quality. Very recent data from follow-up studies of children now in school who were in out-of-home care when they were very young indicates that the earlier and the more hours children spent in child care when they were very young, the more behavior problems they presented later on in school - especially in the case of boys.

It is difficult to interpret this kind of finding. Again, it seems reasonable to assume that it is related to aspects of the quality of the provision. This long-term effect of many hours in group care during the first few years of life may be related to an excessive amount of time spent in group activities versus intimate one-on-one interaction with adults to whom the very young child feels attached.

There are at least two paradoxical elements related to these trends:

On the one hand, as already suggested, we are expecting the care of young children - even during their first year (except in Scandanavia) to be provided mostly by women who are not the children's parents. These women are very poorly paid, at least in the US, and poorly trained - if they are trained at all.

On the other hand, it is difficult to make the case that these caretakers need to be trained and should be paid as trained professionals. When we ask for more such financial investment in the care and education of our very young children, we are reminded by those who make the decisions about funds and regulations, that:

- because anybody can raise children, any woman who has a child knows what to do with her child without training, and
- even in the many parent-education and parent support programs that we have in North American, and in other countries, (and I know you have been working hard in this area in Turkey) we are reminded frequently that we must respect the parents, respect their own culturally determined ways of raising their children, and told that "parents are the child's first (or best) teacher."

On another hand, we are learning much more about the kinds of experiences very young children need very early if they are to have optimum neurological development. That is too big a topic for this occasion. But it is clear from recent research on the development of the neurological network in the very young brain (See Blair, 2002) that our youngest children need extensive one-to-one continuous interaction to stimulate the growth of the essential connections between the mid-brain where emotions are generated, and the pre-frontal cortex, where executive, planning and intentional behavior is processed. Such frequent one-to-one continuous and synchronous interaction between the young child and an adult is more likely to occur during home-based care, or very small group environments in which children's early experiences are enriched in important ways.

Such frequent synchronous interactions, as Blair (2002) calls them, can only be provided in out-of-home group settings if there are plenty

of adults who are well trained in how to engage very young children in meaningful, continuous interaction, and to do so frequently and regularly. This can be beautifully observed in the *nido* in Reggio Emilia. I am sure that those of you who are familiar with the quality of provisions for young children in Reggio Emilia will agree that what they are doing in both the infant-toddler and the pre-primary classes it is the "cutting edge" of practices in our field. But we should all keep in mind that what they do is not cheap and it is not easy. They work very hard.

So, we have more and more children in group environments, younger and younger, cared for by poorly trained and poorly paid women, just at a time when we know better than ever before that frequent and meaningful one-to-one interaction is essential for the very young.

Another paradox related to this trend is that it is reasonably certain that one of the things that is basic to all of our children is they have parents they can look up to. Not in fear, but in respect particularly, and ideally love and admiration. As I have said many times before, everyone agrees that young children need to <u>feel</u> loved - not just to <u>be</u> loved, but to feel loved.. *But the love that is needed to be able to grow must come from someone they can look up to* - someone who approaches them with confidence optimum confidence.

On the other hand, at least in North America, parents are the object of tremendous amounts of information dissemination about how to raise their children. All of which is to suggest that many young parents are less confident about their parenting than they should be. They are also not sure about the future in which their children will be adults. even though it is clear that children benefit from having parents who are confident in their own approach to their children, parents are raising children in more and more complex environments in which they are not protected from a great deal of information previous generations did not have at such young ages. Of course, we can't go back to earlier times - they made mistakes too. In fact, the history of childhood is a history of unrelenting misery. So modern parenting is a complex matter that is full of paradoxical issues.

Another trend, in the US and in the UK as well, is to expect the preschool period to be a time of intense preparation for the next school, for later formal schooling. Preschools and the teachers who work in them - at

least in the US - are under constant, if not increasing pressure to prepare children for standardized tests, and to meet state and local standards of achievement or attainment, even during the preschool years. To me it often seems that we are doing to children earlier and earlier what we probably should not do to them later also! Once again we are caught up in strong and sometimes bitter disagreements about what kind of teaching or pedagogical methods are really appropriate for very young children. These battles are not new in our field. There are records of such struggles in the UK going back about 70 years. As long as I have been in the field this dispute about appropriate teaching methods for young children has been one of its main topics.

One interesting way of thinking about these curriculum issues was suggested at the recent meeting of the European Early Childhood Research Association in Scotland. Prof. Sally Brown of Stirling University in Scotland, presented a very thought-provoking paper in which she pointed out that different kinds of employment positions, or jobs or work are embedded in different cultures. For example, those who make decisions about policies, administration, financing, testing, accountability, rules and regulations related to early childhood education are people she referred to as members of the "outsider" culture. Whereas, those who work directly on a daily basis with children in preschool settings belong to what she referred to as the "insider" culture.

From the perspective of the "outsider" culture, the rules they formulate indicate what should be happening on a daily basis inside an early childhood setting. Even more important, these "outsiders" assume that there will be standard results if the adults do as they are told and if they behave strictly according to the laws, rules and regulations. That "outsider" culture believes that 'If you give these lessons these ways, a certain number of times, the outcomes or the effects will be as we predict' on a test or measure of some kind.

In contrast, as Brown points out, the "insider" culture - that is the culture of the teachers and child care providers who work directly and daily with the children, is very different. It is deeply rooted in the actual context in which they work every day. The context consists of all the attributes of all the participants in a particular locale with particular families and children in a particular neighborhood. The "insider" culture practitioners must put high priority on such things as the safety, well-being, and health of each child. If those basic things are in order, the "insiders" must attend to the

practical matters of the smooth running of the daily schedule of activities and events and the provision of materials. The matter of how well the children will perform on tests or how successful they will be when they attend formal school at a later time cannot be on the top of their daily concerns.

The members of the "outsider" culture have their own views of what makes a good quality provision for young children. They look at "results" - and disregard any potentially high risks associated with using standardized measures or tests for young children. Few, if any of them will be aware of the fact that young children are notoriously poor test-takers - for lots of reasons linked to their ages. Furthermore, on the basis of early tests, many children might be labeled early as deficient or unable in some way, and labeling alone presents a variety of risks to young children. Once labels, it is very difficult for a child to break out of the labeled category, even if it was incorrectly applied to begin with. We should also keep in mind what was expressed long ago by a British philosopher, namely: He who controls the tests controls the curriculum.[1]

The members of the "insider" culture have their own views of appropriate criteria of the quality of provisions for young children. They are more likely to focus on meeting individual needs, providing an appropriate range of activities and experiences for the children, and guiding their social as well as intellectual development.

At this point, I want to present an overview of how we might look at the quality of our provisions for all of our young children so that we ensure that their basic needs are met. Some of you may be familiar with my earlier writing on this approach to looking at the quality of our programs. Following the discussion of criteria I will show you an example of what it can look like when we use pedagogical practices that address the basic needs of all of our children.

II. Looking at Quality that is Basic for all of our Children

Any time we talk about the quality of something, whether it is the quality of a pair of shoes, or of a movie, or the leadership of a country, we always use criteria - whether we are aware of them or not. In the case of a pair of shoes, the criteria might include how comfortable they are, what color they

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[1] I am reasonably certain this quote is attributable to R. F. Dearden. But I have not been able to track down the precise source.

are, how long they will last, how well they are made, how waterproof they are, and many other criteria.

Many of you are already familiar with the idea that there are at least five possible perspectives from which to examine the criteria of quality of the provisions we make for our young children - everywhere. I propose that there are at least five perspectives on the quality of provisions for young children, as follows:

1) The first is what I call ***the top-down perspective*** as taken by officials who regulate the provisions. They use criteria of quality such as the equipment, and other features, as seen from above by those in charge of the program or responsible for its license, supervision, inspection and accreditation.
2) The second is what I call ***the bottom-up perspective*** which I want to focus on today. This perspective refers to criteria about how the program is actually experienced by the participating children.
3) A third perspective is the ***inside perspective***, deals with criteria related to what it feels like to be a member of the staff who work within the provision.
4) A fourth perspective, which could be called an ***outside-in*** perspective, involves criteria concerning how the program is experienced by the families it serves.
5) A fifth perspective takes into account how the community and the larger society are served by a program. This can be called the ***societal perspective*** and in some sense, the *ultimate* perspective on program quality.

First, for today, I want to outline briefly some criteria for each of these perspectives and then focus on the bottom up - criteria concerning what I think is basic for all of our children.

1) <u>Top-down Perspective on Quality</u>

As I have suggested, this is the perspective taken by regulatory officials, those responsible for licensing and other aspects of official responsibility for social services in a community.

Some of the criteria used by those taking a *top-down* perspective are:

- ratio of adults to children;
- qualifications and stability of the staff;
- characteristics of adult-child interaction;
- quality and quantity of equipment and materials;
- quality and quantity of space per child;
- health, hygiene and fire safety provisions, and so forth.

Each community can add to and subtract from this list according to the criteria that make sense to their own traditions, contexts, and cultures.

In any community, anywhere, those involved can discuss these criteria and develop an agreement on what the criteria should be, and at what standards they should be met.

2) The Bottom-Up Perspective on Quality

I want to emphasize today that the significant and lasting effects of a preschool program depend primarily on how it is **experienced** from below, i.e. how it is experienced by the children it is designed to serve. In other words, the actual or true predictor of a program's effects is the day-to-day quality of life experienced by each participating child.

- A major big question when it comes to what is basic for all of our children is: What criteria should we use to judge the quality of provisions? How can we decide about those criteria? Who should decide? I suggest that one answer to these questions is that the members of the profession should at least present their position - as a group of professionals - on what are appropriate criteria for judging the quality of a provision for young children. A professional association should prepare and distribute a position statement on what criteria should be used to judge the quality of the services provided to its community's children.

Here are my suggestions of some of the criteria that could be included:

Although we can't ask young children the questions listed below about their experiences directly, we can infer what their answers might be to the questions listed below by knowing them well, and observing them closely. The overall question is: **What does it feel like to be a child in this**

environment[2] **day after day after day?** This approach requires making inferences about how each child would – if he or she could - answer questions like the following (if we could ask them):

1) Do I usually feel **welcome** rather than **captured**?
2) Do I usually feel that I **belong** rather than that I am **isolated**, or just one of the crowd?
3) Do I usually feel **accepted**, **understood** and **protected** by the adults responsible for me, rather than **scolded** or **neglected** or **ignored** by them?
4) Am I usually **accepted** by some of my peers rather than **isolated**, **avoided** or **rejected** by them?
5) Am I usually addressed **seriously** and **respectfully**, rather than as someone who is just "precious" or "cute"?
6) Do I find most of the activities **intellectually** engaging, absorbing, and challenging, rather than just fun, amusing, entertaining or exciting?
7) Do I find most of the experiences **interesting**, rather than **banal**, **frivolous** or **boring**?
8) Do I find most of the activities **meaningful**, **purposeful**, rather than **mindless** or **trivial**?
9) Do I find most of my experiences **satisfying**, rather than **frustrating** or **confusing**?
10) Am I usually **glad to be here**, rather than **reluctant to come** and **eager to leave**?

There is general widespread agreement that on most days, each child in an early childhood program should feel welcome, feel that he or she belongs in the group, and should feel accepted, understood and protected by those in charge. The remaining questions in the set concerning other aspects of the child's experiences, however, are included to emphasize the importance of addressing young children's real need to feel **intellectually** engaged and respected, and to encourage all responsible for them to do more than just keep them busy and happy or even excited. It is my view that too often

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[2] The inferred answers to this question should reflect the nature of experience over a given period of time, depending upon the age of the child. Hence the term *usually* is repeated in most of the questions in the list.

assessments of early years programs settle for keeping children busy, having fun, and just playing.

The last question on this list of proposed criteria reflects my assumption that when the intellectual vitality of a program is strong, most children, on most days, will be eager to participate in it and will be reluctant to leave the program. Their eagerness will be based on more than just the "fun" aspects of their participation. It will represent genuine involvement in a variety of projects and activities undertaken in the classroom.

When we can safely assume that most of the answers to the questions as phrased above are at the positive end of the continua implied in them, we can assume that the quality of the program is worthy of the children. However, the question of how positive a response has to be on each *criterion* to meet a *standard* of good quality remains to be determined.

Of course, there are many other potential factors that might influence children's eagerness to participate in a program. And any program and any child can have an "off" day or two when the events and activities are less than ideal.. I will return to these criteria later. Needless to say, there are many possible explanations for any of the answers children might give -- if they could -- to the questions listed above. A program should not automatically be faulted for every negative response. In other words, the causes of children's negative subjective experiences cannot always or solely be attributed to the staff or other aspects of the program.

For what then, can the staff be appropriately held accountable? I suggest that while they cannot be held accountable for all possible cases of negative experiences, they are accountable for applying all practices *acknowledged and accepted by the profession* to be relevant and appropriate to the situation at hand. That is why it is so important for the members of the profession to develop clear statements of what it agrees on as standard professional practices - below which no member's practices shall be allowed to fall. This can and should be done in each of our countries - not sure we are ready yet for international professional standards, as cultures and contexts and constraints vary so greatly.

In sum, I propose that the quality of a program is good if it is experienced from the bottom-up - *by each and every child* - as intellectually as well as socially engaging and satisfying on most days, and is not simply a sequence of "fun" activities and occasional exciting special events.

I would like to add here just a word here about *the role of play.* It is my impression of many children in Western developed countries today, that young children do little else. A great deal of their time and energy is taken up with playful, amusing and entertaining activities, including watching amusing programs on television, and playing with various video games. On the basis of my travels to many parts of the world, I suggest that time spent with amusement, entertainment and play is most exaggerated in the US. I sometimes wonder if the tradition of early childhood education of emphasizing the importance of play as the natural way that children learn originated at a time when children played too little. The main point I want to emphasize here is that while it is clearly the case that young children naturally learn through play, ***it is not the only natural way that children learn. It is just as natural for children to learn through observation and investigation.***

I suggest that it is basic for all of our children to be engaged in observations and investigation of things and events in their own experience and environment worth knowing more about. Not everything is equally worthy of children's energy and time. One of our responsibilities is also to educate children's interests, to alert them to those phenomena and events around them worthy of their attention and understanding. Furthermore, I believe that many of us seriously underestimate children's intellectual powers when we imply that children have to have fun, and that learning and school should be "fun." Some fun, yes, of course. Yes, such as special events, celebrations and festivals help to alleviate the tedium that can occur from any hard work.

But fun is a cheap goal. As I have often said, enjoyment is not a goal of education; it is the goal of entertainment. One of the important goals of education, at every level, is to engage the learner's mind in worthwhile intellectual activity. I believe that when we do that well, the learner finds it enjoyable and satisfying. But the enjoyment and satisfaction are benefits, or side-effects or by-products of good teaching and a good curriculum, not a goal. In the light of this view of how children learn, I suggest that they should be engaged in projects that involve them in observations and investigations of events and phenomena in their own environments worthy of understanding more fully, as you will be able to see in the slides I will show shortly.

A brief look at the third perspective: from the **inside**. This refers to the criteria of quality of an early childhood program as perceived from the

inside, that is, by the **staff**. It includes criteria classified into three dimensions: (a) colleague relationships, (b) staff-parent relationships, and (c) relationships with the sponsoring agency - those whom Brown refers to as members of the "outsider" culture who govern the program.

1) **Colleague relationships**. It is highly unlikely that any program can be of high quality on the criteria thus far suggested unless the staff relationships within it are also of good quality. Assessment criteria for this aspect of quality would be based on how each member of the staff might answer such questions as:

-On the whole, are relationships with my colleagues:

1) supportive rather than contentious?
2) cooperative rather than competitive?
3) accepting rather than adversarial?
4) trusting rather than suspicious?
5) respectful rather than controlling?

In principle, good quality environments cannot be created for children (in the bottom-up sense) unless the environments are also good for the adults who work in them. Of course, there may be some days when the experiences provided have been "good" for the children at the expense of the staff (for example, Halloween celebrations), and some days when the reverse is the case. But on the average, a good quality program is one in which both children and the adults responsible for them find the quality of their lives together satisfying and interesting.

b) Staff-parent relationships. It seems reasonable to assume that the relationships between the staff and the parents of the children they serve can have a substantial effect on many of the criteria of quality already proposed. In addition, I suggest that the criteria to be used here could include the way each staff member would answer questions such as those below.

1) Are my relationships with parents satisfying?
2) Do I feel effective in my relations with parents?
3) Are my efforts appreciated by the families?

4) Are my views and preferences for the goals of the program respected (not necessarily agreed with)?

Certainly parents are more likely to approach teachers positively when teachers themselves initiate respectful and accepting relationships. However, in countries like the US and the UK, with their highly mobile and very diverse populations, it is *unlikely* that all the families served by a single program, or an individual teacher, are in complete agreement on the program's goals and methods. This lack of agreement inevitably leads to some parental dissatisfaction and parent-staff friction. The development of positive, respectful and supportive relations between staff and parents who share a background of culture, language, and ethnicity is relatively easy and can be achieved by untrained staff. But the development of such relationships between staff and parents of diverse backgrounds requires *staff professionalism* that includes insight and judgment based on a combination of experience, training, and education, as well as personal values. This aspect of staff-parents relationships are not easy; they are not just a matter of good intentions, but involve complex interplay of professionalism and cultural diversity.

c) Staff-sponsor relationships. One potential indirect influence on the quality of a program is the nature of the relationships of staff members with those to whom they are responsible. It seems reasonable to suggest that, **in principle, teachers and caregivers treat children very much the way they themselves are treated by those to whom they report**. To be sure, some caregivers and teachers rise above poor treatment, and some fall below good treatment. But one can assume that **in principle, good environments for children are more likely to be created when the adults who staff them are treated appropriately on the criteria implied by the questions listed below**.

Note also that a recent study by Howes and Hamilton (1993) calls attention to the potentially serious effects of staff turnover on children's subjective experiences of the program. Thus the extent to which program sponsors provide contexts hospitable and supportive of staff should be given serious attention in assessing program quality. Assessment of quality in terms of this dimension of the inside perspective would be based on the staff's answers to the following questions:

1) Are working conditions adequate to encourage me to enhance my knowledge, skills, and career commitment?
2) Is the job description and career advancement plan appropriate?
3) Am I usually treated with respect and understanding?
4) Are those to whom I report usually supportive and encouraging?

Once again, not all negative responses are necessarily and directly attributable to the sponsors or administrators of a program or the "outsiders" culture; the extent to which they are so would have to be determined as part of an assessment procedure.

The Outside-In Perspective on Quality

The fourth perspective concerns how each **parent** would answer such questions as:

My relationships with the staff of the program are:

1) primarily respectful, rather than patronizing or controlling?
2) accepting, open, inclusive, and tolerant, rather than rejecting, blaming, prejudiced?
3) respectful of my goals and values for my child[3]?
4) welcoming contacts that are ongoing and frequent rather than rare and distant?

As suggested earlier, the positive attributes of parent-teacher relationships suggested as criteria of quality above are relatively easy to develop when teachers and parents have the same backgrounds, speak the same languages, share values and goals for children, and in general, like each other. But the development of such positive relationships between staff and parents of diverse backgrounds and cultures requires true professionalism.

Parents are also more likely to relate to their children's caregivers and teachers in positive ways when they understand the complex nature of their jobs, appreciate what teachers are striving to accomplish, and when they are aware of the conditions under which the staff is working.

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[3] The concept of respect does not imply agreement or compliance with the wishes of the other.

Of course, it is possible that negative responses of some parents to some of the questions listed above cannot be attributed directly to the program and the staff, but are caused by things that staff may or may not be aware of, or be able to determine or control.

The Outside Perspective

The community and the society-at-large that sponsor a program also have a stake in its quality. There is a sense in which posterity itself eventually reaps the benefits to be derived from high quality early experience for its young children, and in which all society suffers social and other costs when early childhood program quality is poor[4].

Assessment of quality from the perspective of the larger society should be based on how citizens and those who make decisions on their behalf - "outsiders" might be expected to answer the following kinds of questions:**

1) Am I sure that community resources are appropriately allocated to the protection, care and education of our children?

2) Am I confident that those who make decisions on our community's behalf adopt policies, laws, and regulations that enhance rather than jeopardize children's experiences in early childhood programs?

3) Am I confident that the resources currently available to early childhood programs in our community are sufficient to yield long-term as well as short-term benefits to children and their families?

4) Are high quality programs affordable to all families in our communities who need the service?

5) Are the working conditions (salary, benefits, insurance, etc.) of the community's programs sufficiently good that the staff turnover

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[4] One aspect of the impressive preprimary schools of Reggio Emilia in Italy is the extensiveness and depth of the involvement of the whole community in all aspects of their functioning. For an interesting description of community partnerships and early childhood programming see Spaggiari (1993)

rate is low enough to permit the development of stable adult-child and parent-staff relationships, and to permit staff training to be cost-effective?

6) Are the staff members appropriately trained, qualified, supported and supervised for their responsibilities?

Since programs for young children are offered under a wide variety of auspices or sponsors in many countries, each program can generate its own list of appropriate criteria for assessment from the outside perspective.

Implications of these five Perspectives.

1) Whose criteria are most important?

Discrepancies Between Perspectives. What if a program meets criteria from a top-down perspective, but not from the bottom-up or on the outside-inside criteria?

Good space and equipment, but intellectually poor for the children - then what?

In theory, a program could fall below acceptable standards on the top-down criteria (e.g. insufficient space or poor equipment) and yet be experienced as satisfactory by most of the participating children.

- Since I am suggesting, however, that it is the view from the bottom-up that determines the ultimate impact of a program, some flexibility in applying the top-down criteria of quality might be appropriate.
- It is also conceivable that the staff might have appropriate relationships with parents, but with few of the children. Or it could be that children are thriving, but parents do not feel respected or welcomed by the staff.
- On the other hand, it could be that the bottom-up assessments are low, but the program is rated high in quality from an outside-inside parental perspective, or vice versa.
- For example, a staff may feel obliged to engage children in academic exercises in order to satisfy parental preferences even though the children's lives might be experienced as more

satisfying if informal and more intellectually meaningful experiences were offered.

- In such instances the bottom-up assessment of quality is less positive than the one from the outside-in perspective.
- Should one perspective be given more weight than another in assessing the quality of a program? If so, whose perspective has the first claim to determining program quality?

2) Issues of Accountability.

- Program providers can hardly be held accountable for all negative responses on the criteria listed for each perspective.
- Some children come to a program with problems of long standing that originated outside of it. Similarly, parents and staff may register low satisfaction on one or more of the criteria due to factors not attributable to the program itself.
- Some families may be struggling with the vicissitudes of their own lives in ways that influence their responses to the program but are not necessarily attributable to it.
- Problems of attributing the causes of clients' perspectives on a program raise the difficult question of establishing the limits to which the staff can be fairly held accountable.
- As already suggested, the staff of a program is not obliged to keep everyone happy as much as it is required to apply the professionally accepted procedures as appropriate for each case.
- This suggestion implies that the profession - in each of our countries - has adopted a set of criteria and standards of appropriate professional practice.
- The view of the limits of staff accountability proposed here implies that at least one essential condition for high quality programs is that all staff members are qualified and trained to employ the accepted practices, accumulated knowledge, and wisdom of the profession.
- To be able to respond professionally to each negative response from the bottom-up or outside-inside perspectives requires well-trained and qualified staff with ample professional experience--especially in the case of the program director.
- The view of the limits of staff accountability also emphasizes the urgency for the profession to continue the development of a clear consensus on professional standards of practice below which no practitioner can be allowed to fall.

Conclusion

Many factors must be taken into account to ensure that all of our youngest children have these basic kinds of experiences that will contribute to their growth, learning, and development in the early years.

Blair, Clancy. (2002). School Readiness. Integrating Cognition and Emotion in a Neurobiological Conceptualization of Children's Functioning at School Entry. *American Psychologist.* Vol. 57, No. 2, 111 - 127

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